



Feb 01, 2002

## James Lafayette

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**BLACK HISTORY: VIRGINIA PROFILES**

**1997 PROFILES**

**J**ames Lafayette gave valuable assistance to the American colonists as a double agent during the Revolutionary War. His daring won his freedom from slavery.

Born in 1748 on William Armistead's New Kent County farm, James received permission in 1781 to leave his master's service and volunteer with the American forces under the Marquis de Lafayette, a young French general and an ally.

James' offer to assist Lafayette's small army came at a critical time. The British had devastated Richmond, looting and burning much of the city and chasing the Virginia legislature from the Capitol.

Gen. Lafayette began sending spies behind British lines. Impressed with James' intelligence and good memory, Lafayette decided he was above performing menial tasks. He sent James to enemy camps to get information on troop numbers, gun locations and morale of the army.



Marquis de Lafayette



- **Valentine Museum**

(804) 649-0711

- **The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution**

by William C. Nell

James first worked as a volunteer in the camp of Benedict Arnold, who led one of two British armies in Richmond. Lord Charles Cornwallis led the other.

In Arnold's camp the unassuming, friendly James served officers and guided them on the road. After Arnold returned to the war in the North, James worked as a waiter in the camp headquarters of Lord Cornwallis.

Historians believe his job as a trusted servant gave him the opportunity to stand by as the general and officers discussed plans while they ate and drank. Risking his life, James would later whisper what he

overheard to other trusted black men in the camp who passed the information on to Lafayette.

### The Times of James Lafayette 1748

James born  
**1773**  
Boston Tea Party:

James later returned to Lafayette's camp and told Lafayette that Cornwallis had sent him as spy.

James' work as a master spy helped keep enemy troop advances in check and was instrumental in setting the stage for George Washington's victory at Yorktown, the final battle in the war.

After the British surrender, Cornwallis visited Lafayette's headquarters where he saw James, who he thought was his spy, wearing an American uniform.

In 1784, Lafayette wrote a certificate praising James' work as a counterspy:

*This is to certify that the bearer by the name of James has done essential services to me while I had the honour to command in this state. His intelligences from the enemy's camp were industriously collected and most faithfully deliver'd. He properly acquitted himself with some important commissions I gave him and appears to me entitled to every reward his situation can admit of.*

American colonists rebel against British taxes <b>1781</b>
British surrender to American and French forces at Yorktown <b>1817</b>
Frederick Douglass, abolitionist, born <b>1824</b>
James Lafayette and the Marquis de Lafayette meet again in Richmond <b>1830</b>
James Lafayette dies

James sent the certificate -- and his request to be a free man -- to the Virginia legislature, which granted him his freedom in 1787. James took Lafayette as his surname.

Twenty-three years passed before the state awarded James Lafayette the annual pension paid to whites who had taken part in the war.

Decades later the state awarded James Lafayette an annual pension for his service to the American cause during the war.

As the Revolution ended, Gen. Lafayette suggested to George Washington a plan to free American blacks. Later in Paris, Gen. Lafayette sponsored the Society of The Friends of the Blacks and worked for equal rights for men of all races. Historians surmise the relationship between Gen. Lafayette and his slave spy led to the general's work to end slavery.

In 1824 the aging marquis toured America for the last time. While in Richmond he met with his old comrade James, then 76. During this visit James Lafayette, dressed in a military coat, sat for his portrait. It hangs in Richmond's Valentine Museum.

James Lafayette died in 1830.

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SOURCES: Black Heroes of the American Revolution by Burke Davis; The Negro Almanac, A Reference Work on the African American, Fifth Edition, compiled and edited by Harry A. Ploski and James Williams. The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-1800 by Sidney Kaplan.

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